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ON HALLS THAT NEED COLOR

BY CHARLES DE KAY

CIVIC architecture in New York has always been a wondrous thing, not so much for what it offers as for the chances presented which it has failed to take advantage of. In former years we had the excuse of a municipal government run by men to whom art was an unknown quantity, but to-day that excuse is no longer available. As a rule, our Mayors, and at times even some of our abused Aldermen, possess no little knowledge of art, or at the worst are aware of their own deficiency, and are disposed to bow to the opinion of those who have the reputation of being connoisseurs.

The love of color is deeply implanted in humanity, and just because it is endemic and a sign of democracy it has been decried in the past by those who assume a superiority to the crowd. This natural love of color has been starved in New York for the past two centuries owing to unfortunate examples set by Europe, but here and there it rises to the surface despite all endeavors to suppress it, as for example in stained glass windows, the popularity of pageants full of color, the dress of women.

But when looking at the tall buildings and skyscrapers, or observing with the eye of experience our larger hotels, one is struck by the absence of good color or the misuse of it in combination — the blame whereof may be distributed either to architects or owners, as you please, unless we take refuge in a general indictment of the indifference of the public, which is always the safest thing to do.

One of the most noticeable impressions one gets on entering these large, modern buildings of New York is a sudden effect of coldness which will not yield, even though the decorator may have elected to crowd the floors and walls with furniture fabricated according to the style of some former king of France. What is it that makes these hallways, corridors, entrance halls in our city so repellent to persons who have a natural love for color? It cannot be the feeble copies of furniture called Louis Quinze; or the hangings and general furnishing of these interiors; no, it lies deeper, for these adjuncts far from mitigating the chill rather accentuate it. You realize that the man to whom was committed the final decision as to the interior may have been carefully educated in his profession but was not born with the essential quality, a natural color sense.

There must be something radically wrong in architecture if such great sums are expended and such fine pieces of engineering are produced and so much knowledge of the past is displayed and yet the results are so deplorable.

Otherwise how comes it that we feel as if we do not belong in these halls at all, as if in truth these interiors were not exactly meant for human beings? For one thing it is due to an intolerable, and one may truthfully say, inhuman exactness as to horizontal and upright lines, as to corners, as to spaces between doors and windows—an æsthetic crime which destroys the happiness of mankind in most modern architecture. And for another our ugly masculine garb makes us feel like aliens in an architectural setting borrowed from an alien though ancestral past.

But the more immediate reason for the depressing

atmosphere which meets the art lover in these lofty halls is the almost universal evidence of the lack of a feeling for color. The lack of this sense in the realm of art has its parallel in the lack of humor in humanity in general—but a truce to generalities.

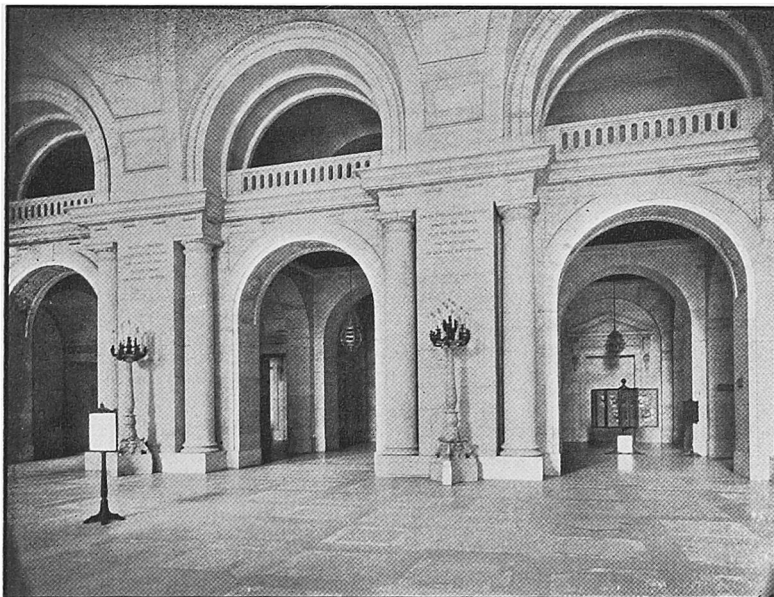
These interiors as a rule present no rational scheme for the distribution of light and shade. To be specific: Let us walk through the long, lofty hall of the Equitable Build-



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GRAND ENTRANCE HALL LOOKING EAST

ing from Broadway to Nassau Street; does not something tell you that, as a human being, you have no right to be there! Why? Not merely because you are an ugly, foolishly garbed biped, but because you have no ground under your feet, you have nothing about you which might through fancy give the feeling of hills and woodlands, because you have nothing above you which stands for the sky! The architect has put you in a glittering white tunnel, perfectly plain as to its walls, exactly even as to its horizontal lines and pitiful in its cold uniformity of white marble. Think of the millions spent upon this building and wonder, if you will, how human beings equipped with the finest materials can make this thoroughfare so obnoxious to men hungry for natural lines and thirsty for color!

Perhaps these mistakes are made because people are brought up to imagine that they can escape from the rules which govern the world. We must have solid ground under our feet and that ground more dark than light—or we are unhappy. We



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must have some relief of texture and color for our horizons; we must have the gray or blue sky above us; and we can not be enclosed in rigid, smooth surfaces, without relief of color—unless we have an unhealthy preference for living in the interior of a white marble tomb!

Observe in the hall of the Equitable Building that in those sections of the floor where they have laid down a few India-rubber mats, you experience a little relief. Suppose the bulk of that floor were covered with dark-red, gray and black broad tiles? Suppose the walls were made of green and gray marbles varying in tone? What a relief we should feel! These colors would mitigate the oppressive exactitude of the engineer, and at least insinuate a suggestion of the ease and æsthetic charm that belong to Nature.

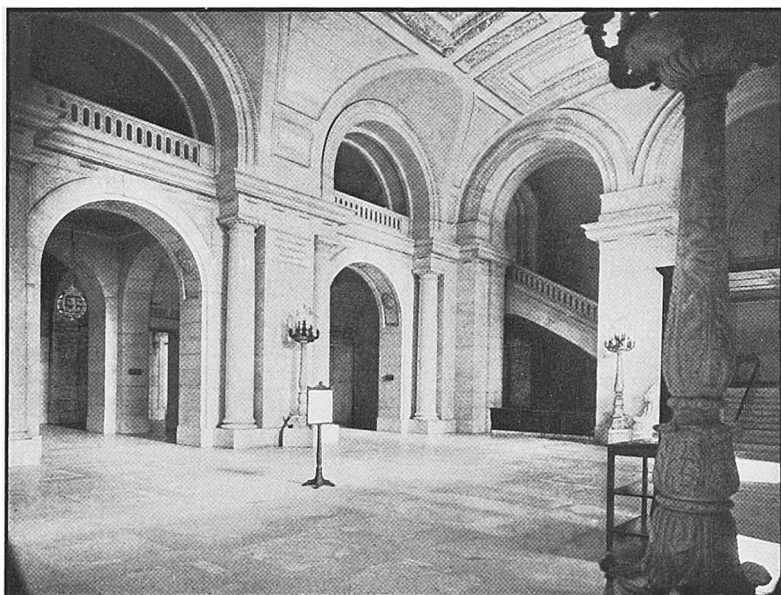
Let us consider another concrete example. Let us saunter up Fifth Avenue. One of the edifices in New York of which the citizens have reason to be proud is the Public Library. Suppose we pass up the broad steps, between the lounging lions and, entering between the Corinthian columns, let us find ourselves in the grand entrance hall. It is of noble proportions and worthy of the splendid emplacement and of the façade that rolls its length from Fortieth to Forty-second Street. From the two stairways, upward right and left, and from the balustrades of the galleries before us, we get the suggestion as of a monumental interior. The architect seems to have put his finest sentiment into this hall. But it is not finished. The white marble glistens from every side, from the floor and from the ceiling, and we see that thus far it is good, but the last touch has not been given it—the touch that introduces light and shade, that produces mystery, that leads one on. Is it fair to the architect to leave what

is perhaps the very best thing in the building incomplete? It is like an etching or engraving without light and shade, interesting and promising for its design, but still in embryo. Metaphorically speaking, there is no sky above, there is nothing to hint or suggest the horizon, except for some naturally darker parts which do not receive as much light as the others. The whole has no chiaroscuro to speak of. In truth after all these years the Library remains unfinished.

Well, now, let us consider what ought to be done to make this hall more attractive and give the architect a "square deal." Observe that the walls round the two great stairways have been so treated by the architect that six spacious panels have been provided, for what? Evidently for paintings or tapestries. But so far nothing has been done. The floor itself is too light in tone, but suppose this remedied and these great panels

hung with modern tapestries of just the right hues, say of those colors which make our autumnal foliage among the most wonderful and glorious products of nature, and suppose, under the arches, as you look forward from the door, the two blind doorways were enriched with tapestries or paintings—how different the impression! What a superior impression would one gain on entering this storage house of literature!

The interior demands that these eight spaces, left for that purpose by the architect, should be enriched in order to accentuate the structural qualities of the halls by the power of light and shade. We can not realize properly the fine points of the structure because of the glitter and reverberation of white stone from above and below and from every side. That is the same trouble we found in the hall of the Equitable Building; but in the latter, the architect seems to have been unaware of the necessity of such



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GRAND ENTRANCE HALL LOOKING NORTHWEST



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GRAND ENTRANCE HALL LOOKING NORTH

assistance of tone and color; whereas here the fault can not be laid upon the architect. The same trouble in all the hallways of the Post-Office on Eighth Avenue and Thirty-third!

In the upper stories of the Public Library here and there the architects have been able to introduce a little color on certain walls, but the effect is trivial. Let us suppose that the authorities who control the decorations or the appropriations for them should make a beginning; would it not be well then to start with this entrance hall?

In New York we have excellent looms capable of weaving every kind of tapestry required, and it would be possible if not easy to procure designs from our artists fitted for the kind of decoration which would be appropriate to a public library. Each of the spaces upon the stairways, left for some such purpose by the architect, could be hung with one of a consecutive series of tapestries, setting forth, for instance, the progress and growth of the carved, written and printed Word. Such hangings would at once lend mellowness and beauty to the interior and bring out the architectural lines of the hall.

Instantly detachable from the walls, these tapestries could be displayed outside the building on days of festival and add much to the sumptuousness of the avenue when great civic processions pass before the grand-stand which is usually erected at this

point on such occasions. Tapestry of the right sort, moreover, owing to the rough surface and its large pattern of colors when properly designed, has a decorative quality even superior to painting on canvas, wood or stone.

For the designs of these series it might be well to enlist the cooperation of associations like the Arts and the Lotos Clubs, The Century, the Municipal Art Society and the City Club. Five adepts in mural painting might be chosen to enter into a competition to produce the best possible scheme of color and the most appropriate subjects for the hall, and also to adapt the separate tapestries to the several panels which would receive more or less light, according to their places. It would be imperative that the artists chosen should have an exceptional sense of color—that is perhaps unnecessary to mention, for in truth it is nothing but a truism. The trouble is that all painter-artists think and feel that they have the sense of color well developed, though fate, alas! may not have been kind to them in that way.

These, to be sure, are not the only walls in the Public Library that clamor for dignified adornment which should invite the best of living artists to contribute their masterpieces. There is, for example, the great transverse corridor on the third story, which gives access to the reading-room and art galleries. Here are splendid, well-lighted panels, rich in their architectural frame-work, waiting still

for the decorations to come, and better suited for paintings than for tapestries, because they will be seen at close range. If the six panels on the two stairways of the entrance hall seem to call for tapestry with large symbolical or mythological designs, those of this north-and-south corridor on the third floor ask for a rather more realistic treatment, perhaps scenes from the history of the Union, or more specifically from the past of New York Colony and State. Other panels less extensive might carry the portraits of the three founders: William B. Astor, Samuel Tilden, Robert Lenox—also views of the old Astor and Lenox Libraries, one of which has already been pulled down, while the other is sure to follow very soon; also the former residence of Tilden, now the home of the National Arts Club. In a city like this—one that tears itself down to rebuild itself every twenty years or so—we must ask our artists to revel in townscapes, so that we may keep some realistic records for the future, however dull such work may seem to some of them at the time.

However, it is chiefly about the entrance to the file room, which admits one to the great reading-rooms, that places have been arranged that insist upon wall paintings. Here the large panels of dark marble with arched heads are bordered with a yellowish marble frame-work; they are four in number and make this a center for the midmost point of the north-and-south corridor. But beside these, are two large panels on the corridor itself and two over the stairways that give access to the landing. Thus we have eight spaces for the employment of color which may be treated in pairs, each pair having a fall of light different from every other couple. All, however, are highly favored as to daylight, though the differing positions with regard to the windows call for differing light-problems. When these wall-spaces are decorated the authorities will have taken a long step forward in the direction forecast by the architect.

There is a third group of panels which may be left to the next generation to embellish, that which one sees in twos, seriatim, as one rises in the elevator on the Forty-second Street side. On the main, second and third floors over against the elevator openings are two panels that call for paintings for each story after the more important wall-spaces above mentioned have been treated. Thus without moving from the halls through which the public passes habitually, and ignoring completely the less frequented parts of the building, we find a score of panels plainly set apart for tapestries and

paintings. They are waiting for the hand of the great or little master, in order that he may supply that beauty and individual interest which raise mere walls to the level of works of fine art.

For the present, however, it is the entrance hall of the Public Library which should be rescued from the frigidity that assails the visitor. There should be something to greet him, and at the same time remind him what sort of an edifice it is that may have attracted his attention as he strolls along the main avenue of Manhattan.

Very suggestive and very full of picturesque symbolic scenes is the history of the growth of writing, from the designs carved laboriously by primitive men on wood, bone and stone down to the latest perfection of the printing-press—from the *skytalé* of the Laconians to the linotype of Mergenthaler, the Pennsylvanian. Only a few of the salient inventions could be suggestively presented, but the series of six or eight tapestries would cover the development of the human mind ever since man began to entrust his ideas to something else beside speech and fashion, something which would convey such thoughts to others without needing his presence.

The entrance gallery of a great library would be an ideal place for some such large generalizations on the Story of the Written Word as an artist might conceive and carry out in tapestry, without falling into realism and losing the big poetic side of the problem in his effort to be true to history. For tapestry was not meant to be the vehicle of history or of *genre* however Charles Le Brun, van Orley and later cartoonists may have yielded to the demand in their day. It was meant for the primitive, the heroic, the symbolical, the religious subject, for the poetic, mystical, extravagant. One can conceive of few excursions into the past better suited to tapestry than the field of the successive steps by which man gradually came to the period when it was necessary to erect magnificent fireproof structures in which to accumulate the thoughts of past and present authors, artists and inventors. Into these palaces do they flow—these products of a myriad minds, leaving to the future the task of threshing the grain from the straw. The Bodleian, the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Public Library are places where the best and also the least output and products of the mind are stored. Should not Greater New York repair this neglect? Can the passing generation do too much to make beautiful and æsthetically harmonious our well-built Public Library?

Charles de Kay

